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Sustainable development: implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development

Lessons learned from the Commission on Sustainable Development

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report responds to General Assembly resolution 67/203, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit a focused report on lessons learned from the Commission on Sustainable Development. Its purpose is to inform the negotiations of the Assembly on defining the format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum established by the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development to follow up on the implementation of sustainable development. As mandated by the Assembly, the report was prepared in consultation with Member States and benefited from the inputs of major groups and other relevant stakeholders.

The report shows that the Commission on Sustainable Development has played an important role in keeping sustainable development high on the international agenda, thus demonstrating the importance of having a high-level body on this issue. The Commission has also made important contributions in a number of areas and has been very innovative in engaging major groups. The report also highlights several shortcomings in the work of the Commission, however, for example its lack of success in fully integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development into its work and outcomes. Its review of and impact on implementation of sustainable development remained weak and it was not able to respond with sufficient flexibility to new and emerging issues. The Commission's monitoring and review of the progress in the agreements related to the means of implementation — finance, technology and capacity-building — has also been judged inadequate. These lessons should be taken into account in the design of the format and modalities of the high-level political forum.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report was prepared in response to the request of the General Assembly, in its resolution 67/203, for a focused report on lessons learned from the Commission on Sustainable Development. The report is intended to serve as a background document for the negotiations of the Assembly on defining the format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum created by the Assembly in accordance with the decision of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development to follow up on implementation of sustainable development.[1] As mandated by the Assembly, Member States have been invited to provide contributions to the report.[2] Inputs were also sought from major groups and organizations and entities of the United Nations system.

2. The Commission on Sustainable Development, created at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, was the first United Nations body on sustainable development. Sustainable development was a relatively new concept at that time. The creation of the Commission formed part of more general guidance on international institutional arrangements for action in this field, including on the role of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. The Commission was intended to be the cornerstone of the United Nations intergovernmental framework for sustainable development governance, and in broad terms, it lived up to expectations in the early years after its establishment.

3. However, over time, Member States, United Nations system organizations and major groups came to the conclusion that the Commission had progressively lost its lustre and effectiveness, pointing to several shortcomings, including its lack of impact on the implementation of sustainable development policies; the ineffectiveness of its role in integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system; and its cumbersome decision-making processes and unclear outcomes. At the same time, it was widely recognized that without the Commission the field of sustainable development would not have the prominent position on the global agenda that it has today. In several instances, the Commission proved instrumental in launching initiatives and introducing new topics into intergovernmental debates.

4. The report provides background information on the establishment of the Commission (sect. II) as well as lessons learned from the work of the Commission since its establishment in 1992 (sect. III). The final section makes recommendations

[1] General Assembly resolution 67/203, in paragraph 3, recalled paragraphs 84 to 86 of the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (General Assembly resolution 66/288), called for a negotiation process under the Assembly to define the format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum to start in January 2013 at the latest and to aim to conclude by May 2013 so as to provide enough time to prepare the first high-level forum to be convened at the beginning of the sixty-eighth session of the Assembly, and requested the Secretary-General to submit a focused and concise report on lessons learned from the Commission on Sustainable Development, compiling relevant existing information in consultation with Member States and benefiting from the inputs of major groups and other stakeholders, to inform the negotiations.

[2] The following Member States provided contributions to the report: Australia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Montenegro, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Senegal and the United States of America. The European Union also provided a written contribution on behalf of its member States.

on the way forward, which will be important as Member States define the format and organizational modalities of the high-level political forum.

II. Establishment and mandate of the Commission on Sustainable Development

Establishment of the Commission

5. In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development recommended the establishment of a high-level Commission on Sustainable Development "in order to ensure the effective follow-up of the Conference, as well as to enhance international cooperation and rationalize the intergovernmental decision-making capacity for the integration of environment and development issues and to examine the progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 at the national, regional and international levels".[3] In its outcome document, Agenda 21, the Conference defined the mandate of the Commission, which was endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 47/191. In that resolution, the Assembly established the Commission as a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council. The Commission was mandated:

(a) To monitor progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 and activities related to the integration of environmental and developmental goals throughout the United Nations system through analysis and evaluation of reports from all relevant organs, organizations, programmes and institutions of the United Nations system dealing with various issues of environment and development, including those related to finance;

(b) To consider information provided by Governments, including, for example, in the form of periodic communications or national reports regarding the activities they undertake to implement Agenda 21, the problems they face, such as problems related to financial resources and technology transfer, and other environment and development issues they find relevant;

(c) To review the progress in the implementation of the commitments contained in Agenda 21, including those related to provision of financial resources and transfer of technology;

(d) To receive and analyse relevant input from competent non-governmental organizations, including the scientific and the private sector, in the context of the overall implementation of Agenda 21;

(e) To enhance the dialogue, within the framework of the United Nations, with non-governmental organizations and the independent sector, as well as other entities outside the United Nations system;

(f) To consider, where appropriate, information regarding the progress made in the implementation of environmental conventions, which could be made available by the relevant conferences of parties;

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[3] *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992*, vol. I, *Resolutions Adopted by the Conference* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum), resolution I, annex II, para. 38.11.

(g) To provide appropriate recommendations to the General Assembly, through the Economic and Social Council, on the basis of an integrated consideration of the reports and issues related to the implementation of Agenda 21;

(h) To consider, at an appropriate time, the results of the review to be conducted expeditiously by the Secretary-General of all recommendations of the Conference for capacity-building programmes, information networks, task forces and other mechanisms to support the integration of environment and development at regional and subregional levels.

6. The General Assembly, in its resolution 47/191, recommended that the Commission incorporate the principles of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development in the implementation of Agenda 21 and keep Agenda 21 under review, and decided that the Commission would also monitor progress in promoting, facilitating and financing, as appropriate, access to and transfer of environmentally sound technologies and corresponding know-how, in particular to developing countries, and consider issues related to the provision of financial resources from all available funding sources and mechanisms as set out in Agenda 21.

7. In addition, in resolution 47/191 the General Assembly also underscored that all relevant parts of the United Nations system and other relevant organizations, including international financial institutions and regional development banks, would assist and advise the Commission in its work. It provided for the innovative engagement of non-governmental sectors in the work of the Commission through the nine major groups defined in Agenda 21. The mandate of the Commission was further expanded in 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa.

8. The Commission has 53 members elected by the Economic and Social Council for a three-year period. Its work is guided by a five-member Bureau with representatives from all five regions. The selection of the Chair of the Commission, which is rotated in order to ensure equitable geographical representation, has almost always been at the ministerial level, in general ministers of the environment. The Commission held its main session for two weeks each year in May.

Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21

9. At its nineteenth special session in 1997, in its resolution S-19/2, the General Assembly assessed the progress made since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 (see resolution S-19/2, annex). The Assembly recognized that while much still had to be done, the Commission had catalysed new action and commitments and had contributed to the new deliberations on sustainable development. The Assembly also reviewed the implementation of Agenda 21 in areas requiring urgent action, including the integration of economic, social and environmental objectives, sectors and issues and means of implementation.

10. In the same resolution, with regard to international institutional arrangements on sustainable development, the General Assembly underlined that greater coherence was necessary in various intergovernmental organizations and processes, and to that end it called for strengthening of the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development together with its system of task managers. This aimed at further enhancing system-wide intersectoral coordination and cooperation for the implementation of Agenda 21. The Assembly also stressed the importance of

Commission's role in increasing regional implementation of Agenda 21, and in this regard mandated increased cooperation with the regional commissions.

11. In its resolution S-19/2, the General Assembly also stated that the future programme of work of the Commission needed to continue: reviewing progress and urging further implementation of Agenda 21; conducting a high-level policy debate aimed at consensus-building on sustainable development; and catalysing action and long-term commitment to sustainable development at all levels. It also underlined that the Commission should perform its functions in coordination with other subsidiary bodies of the Economic and Social Council and with related organizations and institutions, including making recommendations, within its mandate, to the Council.

12. In this regard, the General Assembly also recommended that the Commission adopt a multi-year programme of work for the period 1998-2002, an excerpt of which is shown below:

1998 session: Overriding issues: poverty/consumption and production patterns

Sectoral theme:	Cross-sectoral theme:	Economic sector/major group:
Strategic approaches to freshwater management Review of outstanding chapters of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States	Transfer of technology/capacity-building/education/science/awareness-raising	Industry
Main issues for an integrated discussion under the above theme:	Main issues for an integrated discussion under the above theme:	Main issues for an integrated discussion under the above theme:
Agenda 21, chapters 2-8, 10-15, 18-21, 23-34, 36, 37 and 40	Agenda 21, chapter 2-4, 6, 16, 23-37 and 40	Agenda 21, chapters 4, 6, 9, 16, 17, 19-21, 23-35 and 40

13. At the nineteenth special session the General Assembly also made recommendations regarding the working methods of the Commission, including recommendations on the need for high-level participation from the economic, social and environmental sectors or its role in order to allow for the exchange of national experiences (see box below).

Recommendations of the General Assembly at its nineteenth special session regarding the working methods of the Commission on Sustainable Development

The General Assembly called on the Commission to:

(a) Make concerted efforts to attract the greater involvement of ministers and high-level national policymakers responsible for specific economic and social sectors, together with ministers and policymakers responsible for environment and development with the high-level segment, which was to be more interactive and to concentrate on the priority issues specific to each session;

(b) Continue to provide a forum for the exchange of national experience and best practices, including through voluntary national communications or reports, and to consider more effective modalities for the further implementation of commitments made in Agenda 21, with appropriate emphasis on the means of implementation;

(c) Take into account regional developments and provide a forum for the exchange of experience and initiatives in the area of sustainable development, including through the development of modalities for the regional exchange of national experience in the implementation of Agenda 21 by countries that voluntarily agree to do so;

(d) Establish closer interaction with international financial, development and trade institutions;

(e) Strengthen its interaction with major groups, including through better use of focused dialogue sessions and round tables;

(f) Organize its multi-year programme of work in the most effective and productive way, using the intersessional ad hoc working groups to focus the Commission's sessions by identifying key elements to be discussed and important problems to be addressed within the Commission's programme of work.

The work of the Commission on Sustainable Development subsequent to the World Summit on Sustainable Development

14. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg in 2002, Member States adopted the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, which outlines the roles of the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Commission on Sustainable Development in promoting sustainable development. The Assembly was asked to adopt sustainable development as a key element of the overarching framework for United Nations activities and to give overall political direction to the implementation of Agenda 21 and its review. The Council was asked, inter alia, to: increase its role in overseeing system-wide coordination and the balanced integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development; organize periodic considerations of sustainable development themes, including means of implementation; make full use of the segments of its substantive session to take into account all relevant aspects of the work of the United Nations on sustainable development; promote greater coordination, complementarity, effectiveness and efficiency of activities of its functional commissions and other subsidiary bodies relevant to the implementation of Agenda 21; and increase participation of major groups and functional commissions in its high-level segment.

15. The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation also stipulated that the Commission should place more emphasis on actions that enable implementation at all levels, including promoting and facilitating partnerships involving Governments, international organizations, major groups and relevant stakeholders for the implementation of Agenda 21. In order to achieve this, it was recommended that the Commission should: focus on the cross-sectoral aspects of specific sectoral issues and provide a forum for the better integration of policies, including through interaction among ministers dealing with the various dimensions and sectors of

sustainable development through the high-level segments; focus on actions related to the implementation of Agenda 21, limiting negotiations in the sessions of the Commission to every two years; and limit the number of themes addressed at each session.

16. In addition, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation recommended that the Commission provide for the more direct and substantive involvement of international organizations and major groups and give greater attention to the scientific contributions to sustainable development.

17. Subsequently, at its eleventh session, the Commission adopted a multi-year programme of work. The programme involved seven two-year cycles with a review year and a policy year, starting in 2004. It was envisaged that in the review year the Commission would discuss themes, while in the policy year it would adopt policy decisions. Following that pattern, eight sessions of the Commission were held and four cycles were completed.[4]

18. At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 it was decided that a universal intergovernmental high-level political forum would be established to replace the Commission, building on its strengths, experiences, resources and inclusive participation modalities. The forum is mandated to follow up on the implementation of sustainable development and to avoid overlap with existing structures, bodies and entities (see resolution 66/288, para. 84).

III. Lessons learned from the Commission

19. When assessing the Commission's performance, it is important to appreciate the exceptional breadth and scope of the field of sustainable development. Perhaps the most important achievement of the Commission was that it provided a distinct home, where the sustainable development agenda was kept under active review. The Commission was not as successful, however, in attracting participation from representatives of all three dimensions of sustainable development. It attracted, chiefly, members of the environmental community, and it was thus largely perceived as an "environmental commission". Nonetheless, the Commission provided for multi-stakeholder participation and interactive dialogue, including at the ministerial level, and through its work the importance and value of voluntary, multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development were recognized.

20. Lessons learned from the Commission may be grouped broadly under three headings:

(a) Reviewing and monitoring progress on the implementation of Agenda 21 and Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and related outcomes (the Barbados Programme of Action for Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States and the Mauritius Strategy for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States);

(b) Agenda-setting: developing policy recommendations;

[4] The themes for the three remaining cycles were: Forests, biodiversity, biotechnology, tourism, mountains (one cycle); Oceans and seas, marine resources, small island developing States and disaster management and vulnerabilities (second cycle); and: Overall appraisal of implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme of Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation.

(c) The engagement and participation of major groups and multi-stakeholder partnerships.

A. Reviewing and monitoring progress on the implementation of Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and related outcomes

21. One of the core functions of the Commission has been to review progress in the implementation of Agenda 21, engaging Member States and all relevant stakeholders. Some Member States are of the view that in some areas, including chemicals, energy, oceans and forests, the Commission was quite successful. This was especially so in the first 10 years when the Commission's recommendations resulted in concrete actions in those areas.

National level

22. Under the Commission, there is a process of national voluntary reporting on issues under its consideration, the purpose of which is to share country experiences, case studies and best practices in policy formulation, strategy development, and the implementation of nationally or regionally agreed commitments. Some countries are of the view that these reports mobilized relevant actors at the national level. Nevertheless, as noted by one Member State, guidelines for reporting have been very loose and therefore reporting has been uneven. In addition, little support was provided to build capacity for undertaking such reporting in developing countries, which often lacked data and were overburdened with other reporting obligations. The best use of the accumulated national reporting information was in the synthesized country profiles prepared on the occasion of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. In addition, the reports have been used for illustrative purposes in the reports of the Secretary-General. In terms of impact on discussions at the global level, however, they have had very little impact.

23. In order to strengthen the management and implementation of sustainable development priorities defined at the national level, and to improve coherence between national, regional and global levels, at both the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 and at the nineteenth special session of the General Assembly in 1997, national sustainable development strategies were called for. A sustainable development strategy has been defined as a coordinated, participatory and iterative process of thoughts and actions to achieve economic, environmental and social objectives in a balanced and integrated manner at the national and local levels. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development, in 2002, immediate steps were called for in order to make progress in the formulation and elaboration of national strategies for sustainable development and their implementation, starting in 2005.

24. Many countries have developed sustainable development strategies and prepared reports on their implementation, and strategies and plans have also been widely developed under different regional auspices. A number of collaborative efforts among Governments and technical assistance projects have been implemented to promote shared learning and capacity-building within and among countries. However, despite the fact that the progress made in formulating and adapting sustainable development strategies in each country through multi-stakeholder

consultations has been included in national reporting and that data on the strategies has been made available to Member States on an annual basis, the Commission has never dedicated time to a systematic review.

25. To enhance the ability of countries to monitor progress towards sustainable development priorities, Agenda 21 called on countries and the international community to develop indicators for sustainable development. In 1995, the Commission adopted a work programme on indicators of sustainable development, which resulted in the preparation of an initial indicator set in 1996. The indicator set, which was further revised through a consultative process of testing and refinement with governmental experts from both developed and developing countries, organizations of the United Nations system and other relevant international entities, was endorsed by the Commission for use at the national level in 2001. A further revision of the indicator set was released in 2006, reflecting progress in methodologies, data availability and utilization. To some extent this effort was successful as a number of countries compile data on these indicators for use in decision-making processes. However, the lack of systematic monitoring and interaction between national and international levels has hampered assessments of how effective national sustainable development strategies and indicators have been in supporting the implementation of agreements on sustainable development.

Regional level

26. From the holding of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 to the convening of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012, all international agreements have called for a strong regional component and increasing the role of the regional commissions.

27. At its eleventh session, the Commission mandated the holding of regional preparatory meetings (regional implementation meetings) in review years. Some Member States indicated that they had found these meetings to be useful, but that their impact at the global level was relatively small.

28. At subsequent sessions of the Commission, regional discussions were held during review years and regional perspectives were discussed during policy years. The regional discussions provided an opportunity for back-to-back presentations on the outcomes of the regional implementation meetings and for interactive dialogue on region-specific barriers, constraints and lessons learned related to specific thematic clusters. Those meetings had little influence on the discussions in general, however because they were held in parallel with plenary meetings.

29. At the eighteenth session of the Commission, an interregional dialogue was held. The dialogue was well attended, allowing participants from different regions to listen to each other and illuminating the fact that many countries faced similar challenges.

Global level

30. Many Member States felt that the Commission had not been sufficiently effective in reviewing national progress towards sustainable development and related commitments, and that it did not provide sufficient space to reflect on gaps in implementation and barriers to progress at the global level. The Commission also had limited success in analysing implementation of its own decisions. One notable exception was the decision to review the commitments on water made at the

thirteenth session of the Commission at its seventeenth session. As a part of that review, UN-Water conducted a study on national progress in this area. This reveals the value of including a review mechanism in policy decisions.

31. Nonetheless, many Member States and organizations of the United Nations system found that the Commission had a strong capacity to enable the sharing of best practices and lessons learned, which is increasingly important in helping countries and other stakeholders to exercise policy choices and adopt sustainable development paths.

32. Many Member States and organizations of the United Nations system note that the link between the Commission and the operational entities of the United Nations system has not been strong enough. Neither the governing bodies nor their secretariats sought guidance from the Commission. Even though representatives of some entities participated fairly regularly in the Commission's work, they felt that its decisions did not drive change in their own work, in which they received sufficient guidance from their governing bodies. Some organizations of the United Nations system stated that, even though the Commission had not had a significant impact on policy decisions, it had provided a platform for inspiring action.

33. Some themes on the agenda of the Commission attracted the involvement of agencies of the United Nations system. For example, the theme of agriculture and rural development considered at the sixteenth and seventeenth sessions attracted the participation of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP), while the eighteenth and nineteenth sessions attracted more involvement from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in the context of the 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production.

34. Coordination was another challenge faced by the Commission. While the General Assembly, in its resolution S-19/2, had called for the strengthening of the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development, it was abolished in 1998. It was replaced by overarching inter-agency coordinating mechanisms (including the United Nations System Chief Executive Board for Coordination and its subsidiary bodies) and ad hoc collaborative arrangements, which have generated mixed results in the mainstreaming of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system.

B. Agenda-setting: developing policy recommendations

Themes and programmes of work

35. Responses to the questionnaire suggest that in some cases the Commission has played an important role in setting the international agenda on sustainable development. Its recommendations on specific issues have been advanced both by the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly. Member States have noted a number of its successes, for example, its work contributed to the establishment of the United Nations Forum on Forests by the Council in 2000 to promote the management, conservation and sustainable development of forests. The mandated work of the Forum filled a gap left over from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and paved the way for the adoption of the non-legally binding instrument on all types of forests by the Forum in 2007.

36. In addition, it was on the recommendation of the seventh session of the Commission that the General Assembly establish the United Nations Open-ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea to review developments in ocean affairs.

37. The recommendation of the second session of the Commission also led to the processes establishing the Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade and the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants.

38. In the field of energy, the Commission also pushed the agenda forward. At its ninth session the Commission systematically covered key energy aspects, including accessibility, energy efficiency, renewable energy, nuclear energy and related challenges. Given that energy lacked an institutional home in the United Nations system, the session provided an opportunity to consider energy within the broader sustainable development context. The Commission's work was done through an ad hoc working group, which integrated the perspectives of relevant actors in various groups of countries, thus helping to generate consensus. As a result, negotiations during the main session of the Commission were relatively easy. Building on the work of the ninth session of the Commission, the World Summit on Sustainable Development made some advances, including on financing for modern energy services, as well as on the diversification of energy resources towards cleaner and renewable energy.

39. However, on that the same topic, the Commission could not reach consensus at its fifteenth session. This may be because it had too many issues on its agenda (industrial development, air pollution, atmosphere and climate change) or because it lacked a preparatory process similar to the ad hoc working group used at the ninth session. Nevertheless, the Commission held interesting discussions on energy that were used at subsequent meetings, namely at the High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals in 2010, at which the subject of sustainable energy was reviewed. According to one United Nations agency, that review, in turn, paved the way for the Secretary-General's Sustainable Energy for All initiative.

40. The Commission has also been the sole forum to review the implementation of the outcomes of global conferences on small island developing States. At its sixth session in 1998, the Commission called on the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UNEP and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) to help develop a vulnerability index for quantitative and analytical work on the vulnerability of small island developing States. Since its twelfth session, the Commission has also dedicated one day, small island developing States Day, to the discussion of its themes from the perspective of such States. The Commission was also active in the preparations for the International Meeting to Review the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of small island developing States, held in Mauritius in 2005.

41. Support for the small island developing States materialized through the establishment of the SIDS Unit in the Division for Sustainable Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the creation of the Small Island Developing States Network web platform. In addition, after the holding of the Mauritius Meeting, the Inter-agency Consultative Group on Small Island Developing States was created. The Group, which consists of both United Nations

and non-United Nations organizations active in this arena, is instrumental in the joint planning for the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States, to be held in 2014, and for coordinating substantive work on related issues.

42. As stated above, after the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the Commission adopted a multi-year programme of work, the intention of which was to make the agenda more predictable, to allow time for better preparation for the sessions and to promote increased engagement of stakeholders at all levels. In addition, more discussions expected to be held during the review years. Most Member States, United Nations system organizations and major groups now share the view that setting the multi-year programme of work years in advance has not been of benefit to the work of the Commission as it proved to be too rigid, preventing the Commission from addressing critical contemporary challenges and new and emerging issues. Furthermore, it did not succeed in promoting the better integration of policies by the Commission, as recommended at the Johannesburg Summit. Doing so would have required the Commission to facilitate interaction among ministers dealing with the various dimensions and sectors of sustainable development at the high-level segments and to focus on actions aimed at implementing Agenda 21. In the view of many Member States, this did not happen. Member States also noted that issues related to the environment dominated the Commission's agenda.

43. A number of Member States also felt that too many issues were clustered in each given year, which prevented in-depth discussions. A few Member States indicate that debates in the review year were congenial, inclusive and focused, but that this was not carried over to the policy year. The review year allowed representatives to focus more on progress, challenges and the exchange of experience rather than on lengthy negotiations. Overall, the two-year cycle did not result in action-oriented outcomes.

44. With too many issues on the agenda, the decisions of the Commission on the various thematic issues were issued in one single lengthy outcome document, as a result of which, lack of agreement on one area jeopardized progress on others. An example is the 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production. While generally agreed upon ad referendum at the nineteenth session of the Commission, lack of consensus on the overall outcome prevented its adoption. The framework was eventually adopted at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development as a part of the outcome document. However, the text on mining, which was also agreed upon ad referendum at the nineteenth session, was never formally adopted, although some of its elements are mentioned in the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development.

45. The Commission also had the mandate to consider financing and technology transfer for sustainable development, and all outcomes of the Commission had a dedicated section on means of implementation. However, this section rarely went beyond what was already agreed in other forums. At its seventeenth session, however, the Commission identified the need for adequate financial resources and technology transfer for each thematic area, which contributed to an overall consensus on the outcome document.

Science-policy interface

46. Some Member States, a number of organizations of the United Nations system and several stakeholders underlined the importance of the science-policy interface. Some found that the documentation prepared for the sessions of the Commission, taking into account views of Member States, the United Nations system and relevant stakeholders, has been useful, although it may not have been utilized to its full potential. They were of the view that some of that documentation is still relevant to the issues in the sustainable development agendas.

47. Other Member States expressed the opinion that policy decisions had not been based on sufficient scientific findings since there was too little opportunity for scientists to interact with policymakers, despite the fact that science and technology was one of the nine major groups.

Policy decisions and negotiations

48. Several Member States and other stakeholders expressed the opinion that review years did not contribute to building consensus on the issues that were negotiated in the policy years. This was because there were too many issues crowded onto the agenda, which prevented in-depth discussions and consensus building and precluded the examination of interlinkages among issues on the agenda as well as with other issues on the international development agenda. Discussions at the Commission often emphasized challenges at the national level and lack of implementation of global commitments, but there was not enough time for building consensus on the various issues and on finding common solutions.

49. In addition, processes to prepare for the annual sessions were not robust enough nor adequately utilized. A one-week intergovernmental preparatory meeting, held every second year, was mostly used for preparing the Chair's text, which was the basis for negotiations during the policy session in the same year. That text was often negotiated at the level of the lowest common denominator, without regard for the challenges and constraints identified during the review year. As a result, with some notable exceptions, for example the outcome of the seventeenth session, results were not implementable or action-oriented. Furthermore, the outcomes of the regional preparatory meetings were not sufficiently used or taken into consideration. National reporting, which could contribute to more focused discussions during review years, was also underutilized.

50. As a result, many Member States found that negotiations in the policy year were prolonged, and lacking in value. In some instances, for example, at the fifteenth and nineteenth sessions of the Commission, they failed to lead to an agreed outcome.

51. One Member State indicated that, because Commission was a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council, and its decisions depended on additional deliberations both in the Council and the General Assembly, their authority and impact was limited. One Member State also pointed out that this fact prevented the Commission from becoming the forum for dialogue on sustainable development, given that the Council was already charged with integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development.

Integration of three dimensions of sustainable development

52. In the eyes of some Member States, organizations of the United Nations system and stakeholders, the inability of the Commission to attract the participation of representatives from all three dimensions of sustainable development was a major shortcoming. The Commission, especially over the last 10 years, had become a forum for environmental ministries. On occasion, if the subject matter was of interest, agriculture or other line ministries participated in discussions. However, ministries of finance, planning or development had not been represented. While the Commission, in some decisions, looked at issues from the point of view of all three dimensions, those decisions lacked legitimacy since other line and core ministries did not take part in the discussions and in the adoption of policies. This fact had undermined the implementation of the Commission's decisions and had also contributed to the general perception that it is an environmental body.

53. This view was further amplified, in the view of a few Member States, by the diminished participation of developing countries, including the least developed countries, in the sessions of the Commission, due to lack of funding.

54. A few Member States expressed the view that strengthening the secretariat of the Commission would have helped it to monitor progress and to provide specific support to countries. The secretariat had been reinforced systematically in the earlier days of its establishment, but it had been scaled down in later years owing to the demand for resources for other pressing issues.

C. The engagement of and participation of major groups and multi-stakeholder partnerships

55. Most Member States and other respondents agreed that a major characteristic of the Commission has been its openness to the participation of major groups[5] (non-State actors). Multi-stakeholder dialogues were formally introduced at the sixth session of the Commission in response to a mandate from the General Assembly at its nineteenth special session.

56. The major groups had produced official papers; they were given a space to intervene during the discussions; and they could also comment on negotiated texts. One member of the Bureau of each session of the Commission was charged with maintaining liaison with major groups and briefing them on the intergovernmental process. The multi-stakeholder dialogues also enhanced dialogue with Member States. But, as recognized by a few Member States, their impact on the decision-making process was mixed, and at times limited and indirect.[6]

57. It is generally perceived that stakeholders bring essential perspectives and expertise to intergovernmental discussions, allowing more informed deliberations. The Commission showed great potential as a platform for dialogue and the exchange of

[5] Business and industry; children and youth; farmers; indigenous peoples; local authorities; non-governmental organizations; scientific and technological community; women; workers and trade unions.

[6] Dodds, F.; Gardiner, R.; Hales, D.; Hemmati, M.; and Lawrence, G., Post-Johannesburg, The Future of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, stakeholder forum paper, No. 9, November 2002, see also http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/documents/prep3_background_papers/msdhstudy2.pdf.

best practices between stakeholders of all types, including those organizations and implementers that have a substantial political, intellectual and operational presence in the field.

58. A few Member States found that the major groups were not sufficiently engaged, however, notably in the implementation of decisions. In addition, few non-governmental organizations from the South attended, due to lack of funding, and those who did were mostly from the environmental sector. Two Member States stated that major non-governmental organizations, local governments and the private sector no longer see the Commission as an important forum for their work on sustainable development.

59. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Member States recognized the role of voluntary multi-stakeholder partnerships in the implementation of sustainable development policies, while also recognizing that they could not act as a substitute for intergovernmental commitments. In follow-up, the Commission, at its eleventh session, mandated the secretariat to establish a database to register what became known as Partnerships for Sustainable Development. Such partnerships had to fulfil a number of criteria in order to be registered. These developments provided a flexible framework and a solid mandate to work with all stakeholders, including business and industry.

60. Partnership Fairs, which have been held as part of all sessions of the Commission, showcase their role and importance as implementation and engagement mechanisms. Unfortunately, the timing of the fairs overlapped with the sessions of the Commission, which hindered the review of the contributions of partnerships and reduced the opportunities for the Commission to provide guidance. Furthermore, while the reports of the Secretary-General provided summary reports based on voluntary self-reporting from registered partnerships, obtaining current information on partnerships was difficult. The partnership database never became a well-resourced and modern platform.

61. Since its eleventh session, learning centres on sustainable development issues, consisting of courses designed to impart practical knowledge on sustainable development and to enhance implementation of relevant policies, have been organized during each Commission session. However, some sessions have been used to showcase existing initiatives without providing enough scope for replicability and scaling-up, and this has limited the impact of such initiatives in the view of one Member State. It must be said that there were some popular courses, which provided specific knowledge.

62. In the view of some Member States, side events, even though not an official part of the Commission's sessions, contributed greatly to furthering the engagement of non-State actors. They have provided a platform for showcasing implementation, networking and enlisting support for partnerships, although their quality may have been uneven.

IV. The way forward

63. Possible implications of the lessons learned from the Commission for the format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum established at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development are presented below. The

information is not meant to be exhaustive or to pre-empt the intergovernmental discussions on the high-level political forum.

64. As discussed in this section, it is clear that issues of integration, implementation, coherence, coordination and agenda need to be central to any discussion on the high-level forum if the forum is to add value and engage all relevant actors needed to implement sustainable development policies at all levels.

A. Reviewing and monitoring progress

65. For the forum to be able to follow up and give high-level policy guidance on implementation, as suggested at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, sufficient time should be allocated to preparing its high-level meetings, as suggested by a number of Member States. Other Member States have stressed that the task of reviewing the implementation of sustainable development commitments should be handed over to the Economic and Social Council.

66. A thorough and inclusive process to prepare for the forum would also: help to spur progress in the field of sustainable development; help to avoid protracted negotiations at the forum, which would undermine the impact of its outcomes; and generate ownership of the forum's outcome from the "bottom-up", thus providing it with greater legitimacy.

67. Such preparations can be done formally or informally. They need to be undertaken from the country level all the way up to the regional and global levels, including discussion on the means of implementation.

68. At the **country level**, the forum could encourage the creation of platforms for sharing experiences and lessons learned among governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, including multi-stakeholder partnerships, and the entities of the United Nations system present on the ground, as well as the launching of voluntary commitments.

69. Some Member States underscored the important role of the forum in fostering an exchange of national experiences and lessons learned both among Member States and with other actors. A limited number of national voluntary presentations could be made at each session of the forum. This would allow countries to share their experiences and lessons learned and to learn from others. Such presentations could be made by both developed and developing countries.

70. It is important to strengthen national capacities to engage in the forum and its preparations, and the United Nations system could help in this regard. One Member State suggested that the forum maintain an interactive and up-to-date sustainable development knowledge management platform and a database for sharing practices and lessons learned.

71. At the **regional level**, the regional commissions would need to: strengthen sustainable development as an overarching framework of their work; help to organize discussions on issues specific to each region; review progress made against commitments, gaps and challenges; engage with all relevant regional actors, including major groups, the rest of the United Nations system and other partners; develop recommendations for the forum, either on its theme or on emerging or other issues, for its consideration; and foster the mainstreaming of sustainable development at the national level, ensuring that the policy decisions taken at the

global level are relevant to regional and national levels, as well as to support their implementation.

72. Several Member States recommend that the forum engage the regional commissions more systematically during its sessions, including through their involvement in an enhanced reporting and accountability mechanism for implementation. Interregional dialogues might also be a useful component of the forum's programme.

73. At the **global level**, inputs from the regional and national level need to be given due consideration so that they may be taken into consideration when policy decisions are taken.

74. One issue raised by many Member States is how the forum can attract high-level participants from all three areas of sustainable development. One respondent suggested that the forum be held at the same time as other important meetings engaging various communities, for example during the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council. Another idea might be for the forum to have three co-chairs, one from each area of sustainable development. The guiding principle of integration must underpin the work of the forum. The forum should foster it: (a) at the normative level through appropriate political guidance; and (b) at the regional and country levels through promoting implementation and practical approaches. The forum needs to set its agenda with a view to addressing high priority, timely and relevant issues and challenges facing Member States, and it needs to ensure that its decisions are action-oriented and implementable at all levels.

B. Agenda-setting and developing policy recommendations

75. The agenda of the forum is central to promoting an integrated discussion of the three dimensions of sustainable development and to ensuring that the forum has an impact on the lives of people. It is also critical to ensure the engagement of all relevant actors in the economic, social and environmental areas on themes that are not discussed in other forums, in particular issues affecting the small island developing States.

76. To promote integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development, the forum could address, on an annual basis, a cross-sectoral theme. This would attract participation from across relevant line ministries as well as organizations and agencies of the United Nations system. Such themes could build on the issues identified at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, but do not need to be limited to them.

77. The forum could also focus on a nexus of issues or a cluster of critical themes, such as water, energy, climate change, food, or agriculture. Several Member States underscored that any theme should be reviewed from the vantage point of the three dimensions of sustainable development and that the forum should focus on interrelationships among issues and possible trade-offs.

78. The choice of theme(s) or cluster of themes should ensure focus on relevant and current themes where the forum can contribute to "pushing the envelope", as the Commission did in advancing the agenda the areas of forests, chemicals energy and oceans.

79. The forum should also find appropriate ways to continue addressing issues related to small island developing States, for example by dedicating a special day to those countries and mainstreaming their concerns throughout its work.

80. The forum could also be a natural platform to follow up on the sustainable development goals since they should address and incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their interlinkages (see resolution 66/288, para. 246). One Member State suggested developing a common framework to review progress towards sustainable development, including indicators accepted by all.

81. There is also a need to address means of implementation in an adequate and coherent way. The forum will need to take into consideration the future report of the intergovernmental committee of experts that will examine a financing strategy for sustainable development, building on the mandate of the Commission in this area.

82. Agenda-setting should assure a balance between (a) ensuring a degree of predictability, which would require establishing the agenda in advance to allow enough time to prepare for the forum's sessions, and (b) allowing the forum to address new and emerging sustainable development issues. For example, there could be an advance agenda covering a period of two to three years, including a dedicated item for addressing new and emerging issues.

83. The work and guidance of the forum needs to be supported with a much stronger science-policy interface. Documentation should be prepared with the closer involvement of the scientific community. The global report on sustainable development mandated at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development will be critical in this regard.

84. The secretariat of the forum should thus be strong enough to be a link with the scientific community. At the same time, it should have a sufficient capacity to help respond to country needs for support related to their engagement in the forum, working closely with the United Nations system.

85. As noted by several Member States, the forum should provide high-level policy guidance and leadership to the United Nations system and spur system-wide coordination and coherence. The United Nations system, including international financial institutions, should be engaged at all levels in preparing for the meetings of the forum, with specialized agencies contributing important expertise, as noted by one Member State. This would develop a greater sense of ownership of the forum's recommendations and a greater commitment to mainstreaming them in their respective strategic plans, thus spurring implementation.

86. A few Member States considered that a negotiated outcome may not be the best way for the forum to advance sustainable development. In this regard, varied types of outcomes could be considered, including a communiqué, technical decisions or the launch of new initiatives.

87. Many Member States stressed that the forum should avoid duplicating the work of other bodies and focus instead on achieving synergies with existing forums, including the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, other organizations of the United Nations system and the secretariats of the multilateral environmental agreements. In view of the latest governance changes, it is important to maintain a strong link to UNEP, with its universal membership and its newly established United Nations Environment Assembly, as part of the closer integration

of the three dimensions of sustainable development. The same holds for relevant bodies in the economic and social domains. Two Member States envisaged that the forum would report directly to the Assembly, without prejudice to its relationship with the Council. Two other States noted that the Council, as a functions-based body, can add value, notably by guiding its subsidiary machinery and fostering greater coordination among subsidiary bodies in pursuit of sustainable development.

C. Involvement of non-State actors

88. In the view of many Member States and other stakeholders, an important challenge for the forum will be how to engage non-State actors in its work in a more meaningful way, while retaining its intergovernmental nature. The preparatory process for the high-level political forum could be multi-stakeholder in nature, so that recommendations to be considered by policymakers also benefit from inputs of major groups as was done at the ministerial level multi-stakeholder dialogues held by the Commission on Sustainable Development.

89. It will also be important to explore different modalities for participation and consultation of non-State actors beyond the modalities of the Commission. Member States suggest giving more time to major groups in official debates and engaging more effectively with the private sector. Innovative models might be studied, including the creation of an advisory group within the Economic and Social Council, as suggested by one Member State. In addition to the good practices of the Commission on Sustainable Development, those adopted by the FAO Committee on Food Security and by the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management are possible models. One Member State suggested reviewing the structure of major groups.

90. Partnerships for sustainable development and voluntary commitments also need to be strengthened to boost implementation of sustainable development. One Member State suggested that the forum focus on innovative partnerships in priority areas and on their role in implementation.

91. The holding of an implementation segment might also be considered, in order to feature progress made by partnerships and voluntary commitments in implementation, in the interest of fostering accountability. Such a meeting could engage different stakeholders, focusing on thematic priorities. The organization of intersessional workshops for major groups to build capacity and broker activities, exchange good practices and lessons learned might also be discussed.

92. Some Member States and other stakeholders consider that funding should be provided to support the participation of developing countries and major groups from such countries in the forum, in order to assure better representativeness. National and regional preparations would also need to be supported.

Conclusion

93. The lessons learned from the 20 years of the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development should be the starting point for giving final shape to its replacement, the high-level political forum on sustainable development. The setting of a focused agenda, its working methods and the related challenge of energized and high-level engagement will be the key to its success. As part of the institutional framework for sustainable development, the forum should have a clear niche,

strongly linked to the follow-up of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and other related conferences and summits, while at the same time helping mainstream sustainable development in the work of the United Nations, including the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. To overcome the shortcomings and build on the strengths of the Commission, the forum needs to maintain a strong focus on implementation at all levels, including sharing of experiences; furthering integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development; engaging with the economic and social policymaking communities more intensively; enhancing the engagement of major groups as well as the academic and scientific community; maintaining a focused and flexible agenda and a robust preparation process, with support from a stronger United Nations inter-agency process; encouraging and strengthening partnerships, initiatives and voluntary commitments; and reviewing and monitoring progress on a regular basis.